

[ARCHERS]

535 and old, men and women, is the dance, which is accompanied by music and song." Most of the instruments Schebesta (1941, 244-253) describes serve to accompany dance. He makes three classifications: sportive, mimetic, and erotic dances. The former are not mere exuberant acrobatics, but follow certain choreographic rules; he does not give the rules. The usual form of dance is circular, he says: an outer circle composed of women and an inner circle of men, with the drummer in the center. If there are only a few dancers, the men may dance solos, leaping one by one in toward the drummer, then back to their places in the still-moving circle.

[372] Schebesta also mentions the existence of fire dances, one of which he witnessed on the occasion of a birth in the camp.

535 Erotic dances generally involve two lines of
• 831 dancers, one line male, one female. Each woman comes out of the line in turn and makes an

[P. 188-B]

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[P 188-C] obscene gesture to one of the men, returning to her place as the man follows her and makes a similar gesture. 535 1837.

Mimetic dances usually concern the hunt, says Schebesta.

Drama, chiefly in the form of mime, is sometimes associated with dance and sometimes separate. Schebesta mentions its importance and the ability of the Mbuti in this art, but gives no details. 536

From the material available it is impossible to gauge even the exact nature of these art forms among the Efe archers, let alone their functions in archer society, apart from their obvious recreational role, which seems to have been the only function assigned to them by Schebesta. 53

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Early sources offer only contradiction and confusion concerning the magico-religious system of the Mbuti. A few affirm that the Mbuti are ridden with superstition, but most report that they are without superstition and even without religion. 774

[NET HUNTERS]

Games and pastimes are the same as those for the archers, with the addition of a form of spear practice. A large forest fruit is fixed to the end of a vine which is swung around in a circle. Men standing in a group surrounding the swinger throw their spears as the fruit comes past them, dashing in to retrieve the weapons that miss. 526
[084]

Legend telling, like dance and song, is an important medium of expression as well as recreation. Instrumental music among this group of Mbuti is virtually nil. In a hunting camp a *lukembi* (*sanza*) may be heard, a musical bow, and possibly, though rarely, a notched flute. If the camp is near a village the men may borrow or steal a drum for the dance; otherwise, they use sticks as clappers, either shaved at the end to give a flat sound, or left smooth to give a sharp, hollow sound. The women add to the rhythm with handclaps, and both sexes with stampings of the feet. 538
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There are two kinds of secular dance, erotic and imitative, as described by Schebesta. The third kind of dance described for the archers, 535
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[P 212-D]

[NET HUNTERS]

At

sundown they return to their hut, which they enter, and start singing the special *elima* songs taught to the new initiates by the old woman in charge. The women of the camp sit outside and also sing, having armed themselves with whips made from the vine brought by the girls. [P. 216-C] 881 [533]

The menstruating girl will have sent word to her lover, who may be of the same band but must be of a different lineage. He must fight his way into the hut, through the women armed with whips and against the shower of missiles hurled at him by the girls of the *elima*. In the old days, say the Mbuti, the fighting used to be serious, and sometimes people were killed. The young man, if successful in gaining admission, had to pay an ax for the privilege of deflowering his maiden. He remained with her all night. The next day he was bound with vine and kept a prisoner in the *elima* hut until evening. He was then washed and rubbed with ashes and allowed to leave. 881 836 [613]

From then onward any eligible young man (i.e., not of the same lineage as the girl) could try his luck. If he happened to be the husband of one of the women guarding the hut, she could [831] • [613] [837]

[NET HUNTERS]

[P.227-C]

for the particularly long and intense singing at that time.

I myself witnessed only one such meeting of the *molimo*,¹ the occasion for which was not clear and which took place down near the village. One villager took part. The trumpet and the performer, covered with a cloth, were carried in from the forest on a crude litter and disappeared behind one of the huts. As the playing and singing proceeded, the villager and one or two Mbuti danced around the camp, tearing leaves off the roofs of huts and placing them against the door of the hut behind which the trumpet was playing. There was much laughter, but everyone spoke in low tones. Finally, the player and trumpet were carried away as they arrived, and everyone went to bed.

The other meetings of the *molimo* that I have witnessed were of the more serious kind, following the general disruption in the district among villagers and Mbuti alike when Patrick Putnam died. At these meetings no drums were used, even though they were sometimes available. But even at such meetings there was generally a period, early in the night, during which the men started singing a *molimo* song that mocked the womenfolk, accompanied by a mildly obscene dance around the fire, with much laugh-

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THE ECONOMY

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the ground, and any who are timid or slow get whisked back into the air again as the sapling rebounds, and are much laughed at for their failure.

The tug-of-war separates the sexes, and although it is primarily an adult game, youths and children sometimes join in. However, it is likely to become rough, and youngsters are not encouraged. A man may, and sometimes does, pull on the side of the women, to make a better match, but he may also go to their side as if to help and then start pulling in the opposite direction. It is then up to the women to decide whether they are better off continuing to pull, or whether it is worth their while for two or three of them to attack the man. They themselves will sometimes leave their side and go to the men's side and simply try and pull them away from the vine rope. No restrictions were evident, and each contest continued until the complete collapse of one side or the other. If anything, among the Epulu net-hunters the women seemed to win more frequently. An immense amount of energy was dissipated in this way, yet one tug-of-war would follow another for sometimes as long as an hour.

The division of sexes visible in this contest, and the same implied symbolic conflict, was also visible in the *ekokomea* dance which I saw among the Epulu net-hunters during two honey seasons; but I have also seen the dance in the same band during the course of a *molimo* festival. I found it to be known among all other bands I visited, though I never actually saw it practiced among the archers. With these other bands it is said to be danced on occasions of great importance to the band, such occasions not being specified.

Ekokomea involves a reversal of the sexes, and everyone from the oldest to the youngest may take part. Usually the children follow the youths and adults and imitate the dance on their own. Women put heavy objects in the bark cloth between their legs and stride along in a way that emphasizes the swinging motion of their "genitalia." The men indicate their assumed female sex by performing divers actions typical only of women, often pretending to clean their private parts as women do. Both men and women, but mainly men, may take a leaf or a small strip of bark cloth or skin, make a slit in it, and proudly display it, occasionally putting a finger through the slit so as to leave the symbolism in no doubt.

The dance begins spontaneously, without preparation, with two or three individuals assuming the reversed roles and marching in line from hut to hut, singing, "*Ekokomes*." No satisfactory translation

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- 221 of the word was ever given to me; it simply refers to an elbow, a
222 chicken or a fallen tree, according to pronunciation. It is pronounced
562 all ways, and all forms of translation are given, stories being invented
535 ad lib to explain the dance.

As people come out of their huts or leave their hearths to join in the line, the movements get more and more suggestive and rhythmic, and when the line is complete couples will break away and dance into the center and there imitate the act of copulation according to their reversed roles, while the others dance around, singing and laughing loudly. Each couple tries to outdo the others in exaggeration and suggestiveness, and just about every conceivable abnormal situation is imitated, dogs, chickens, children, even infants being dragged into the act if they are within reach.

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[522] The end of the dance is the usual near-hysterical laughter that is brought on by any form of exaggerated mime or storytelling, with the dancers rolling on the ground and clapping their hands to show their amusement. As soon as this has subsided the dance is likely to start all over again for a second or even a third time.

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[965] *Ekokomea*, however, is by no means danced every day, even during the honey season; more than once or twice a week would be rather frequent. It is similar during the *molimo*. So throughout the year the dance is not likely to take place in any one band more than a dozen times. This is one dance that I have seen danced both in the forest and in the village. It is never danced by the villagers, who regard it as a sign of Mbuti depravity, but who nonetheless watch it with the greatest pleasure. The older Mbuti say it would not be danced in the village, but even to them either its exact significance is not clear or else it is something they were unwilling to discuss.

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221 Much more directly connected with the honey season is a mimetic
222 dance in which the men enact the honey gatherers, the women the
535 bees. The men form a line and dance around the camp as though going through the forest looking and listening for bees. Parallel to them, and sometimes on the verge of the camp or even in the forest, is a line of women. The men sing a honey song, the women buzz like bees. When the men pretend they find the honey and are about to take it, the women descend on them and beat the burning embers they carry above the men's heads so that the sparks fall on them—stinging them like bees, they say. This is often followed by a good-natured fight which may develop either into the tug-of-war or *ekokomea*.

000 Because of the rarity of ritual performances there is one which

776 but everyone agreed that it was a clear indication that he should try.
828 He became the leading trumpet singer, then, not through divine
158 choice but simply through his experience in the *keti* world. He was
554 not regarded as more spiritual, merely as more experienced. However,
776 insofar as both Mbuti and *keti* derive their *pepo* from the forest, if
778 the forest wills them to hunt together in the same time and place
[224] then the mirror images coincide exactly and it is, indeed, a "strong"
hunt. Such coincidence is exhausting, however, and it is not some-
thing actively wished for except, possibly, in times of particularly
poor hunting. Ideally the Mbuti and the *keti* should follow each other
closely, but always remain just slightly apart.

BORU

778 A rather difficult concept of the "house" (*endu*—the same word as
761 for a hut) inhabited by *pepo*. The human and animal body of flesh
826 and blood is, in a sense, *boru*, and so is the invisibility of the *keti*. It
[192] is a term seldom used, but the concept affords a firm basis for a code
of respect for the body, abuse or mutilation of which may drive away
the *pepo*, causing "death" (which for the Mbuti is simply the depar-
ture of *pepo* and its return to the forest or the world of *keti*). Thus
physical violence as a means of settling a dispute is abhorred as a
sacrilege. A sound thrashing is perfectly in order, but any violence
that produces blood causes an opening through which *pepo* may es-
cape. For although associated with air and wind and thus with breath,
it is not thought of as *being* any of these things, and its exact means
of escape is unknown. The bodily apertures are all regarded as re-
quiring attention, however, as possible avenues. It might be pointed
778 out here that insofar as *pepo* is associated with life and may escape
761 through these apertures, this is perfectly consistent with the Mbuti
826 recognition of the sexual act as a means of conveying life, though they
• 831 do not explicitly refer to semen as *pepo*. It is also consistent with the
[535] variations on the sexual act found in the *ekokomea* dance, where not
only are the sexes reversed but attention is drawn to the less usual
[165] apertures, to be somewhat delicate. The role of *ekokomea* as a major
feature of the death festival becomes immediately more understand-
able, its burlesque form allowing for the stated antipathy of the
Mbuti to the unproductive forms of sexual perversion *ekokomea* so
graphically depicts.

765 given fire to eat, just as water is passed through it to "cool" it. It is
372 rubbed with ashes and earth. It is brought into direct contact with
534 every individual by being passed over their heads as they sit around the
fire singing, and each individual will at some time or another, at his
own whim, scoop up ashes and rub the trumpet with them. And in
[535] the evening appearances of the trumpet at the *molimo* hearth, while
[831] the singer holds one end to his mouth and sings, the youth holding
the far end pumps it up and down as he dances in imitation of the sexual
act, sometimes holding the mouth of the trumpet close to his
genitals, imitating the part of either man or woman. Little doubt is
left about the symbolic connection between fire and life.*

765 There is an important distinction between the evening and the
561 morning appearances of the *molimo* trumpet, and between the roles
533 played by different age groups. In the evening the singing is primarily
in control of the *mangesé*, or elders. Frequently, they have their own
fire, the hunters have theirs, and the *kiyana*, or male youths, have
theirs. Everyone joins in the singing, the elders maintaining over-all
control and the hunters being the most prominent singers, except for
the *molimo*-trumpet singer, who may be a youth or a young hunter,
being chosen because of his ability as a singer rather than for any
other reason. It is the youths that do most of the dancing at their fire
[535] or at the central *molimo* fire (from which theirs is made by taking
[831] burning embers and setting them separately). The whole intent of
the evening is to rejoice the forest, and this is done by singing throughout
the night, and by eating a feast specially prepared from food contributed
to the *molimo* hearth. (Just as with food, so with firewood and with fire
itself—every single household in the camp is expected to contribute.) In the
early days of the festival the old lady does not appear, and there is no
attempt to stamp out the fire, though erotic dances are constantly being
danced around and over it. It is only toward the end of the festival that
the nightlong songfest is dramatized by the appearance of the old lady,
her dancing through the fire in an attempt to destroy it, and her tying up
of the men (referred to as both tying up the hunt and tying up the *molimo*).
765 The evening meetings of the *molimo*, though full of the joy the Mbuti wish
to convey to the forest, are nonetheless solemn in that the purpose is

[831] * Fire is primarily connected with women; the hearth is often referred to as the vagina; the association of blood and fire is considered particularly dangerous. Thus the association of the male *molimo* trumpet with the fire and the ashes gives the trumpet phallic significance in this context. Elsewhere, this precise symbolism seems unimportant, the important factor being simply the trumpet's masculinity.

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761 Death itself is recognized as deriving from the forest, so is accepted
152 with regret, but there is enormous concern to conceal the regret and
728 avoid any excessive show of grief, for crying is *akami*. The uncom-
182 fortable fact of death has to be obliterated from the memory as quickly
and effectively as possible, and the band, which has received a blow
at its strength, must be rejuvenated in an exaggerated display of all
the things pleasing to the forest—good hunting, singing, dancing,
765 feasting and, above all, *ekimi*. More than this, the *molimo*, as we have
182 seen, is a means of reaffirming the effective division of the band into
621 age groups, and through both the participation of the old lady, who
535 demonstrates the power of the women over the men, and through the
831 *ekokomea* dance, the lack of sex differentiation is emphasized. *Eko-*
komea may also be regarded in a similar light as the erotic dance over
the fire, where the men symbolically copulate over the scattered em-
bers, fanning them to life. Certainly the sexual act is represented in
the *molimo* dances, if not in the symbolism of the *molimo* trumpet
itself and the way in which it is handled, and there is very evidently
expressed concern with the regeneration of life.

765 The *molimo* is also an occasion on which the band reaffirms all its
621 interpersonal loyalties, and its unity as a band, regardless of kinship
182 considerations. (This is not to deny that the band, and the *molimo*,
may at one time have had a more definitely lineal structure.) It is
significant that it insists on participation by all adult males, includ-
ing not only affines but adult visitors living temporarily with the band
under an obligation, default in which is punishable by death. Such
death itself is said to be brought by the *molimo*; informants differed
as to how death would actually take place—some said by two spears,
some by beating—but in all cases it was held that the *molimo* would
bring death to any who did not fulfill his obligations.

778 Thus the forest is intimately associated with the Mbuti at death,
824 just as it is at birth. The same forest that gives life and strength
76 through the juices of the vine, and through the vine and wooden
[789] charms tied around an infant's wrist, may bring death to that infant,
if as an adult he fails to rejoice the forest during the *molimo* festival.

392 Fire, which is the gift of the forest, but whose ownership is dis-
[778] puted, is central in the life of the Mbuti, representing life itself. (One
[76] legend has it that fire was first owned by a chimpanzee; another by
[773] woman; another by the *keti*. In any case, man [Mbuti] ultimately
stole it and now possesses it.) During the *molimo*, men pass their
392 hands through the flames and then rub gently over their faces. The
765 *molimo* trumpet is passed over the flames. Sometimes men put coals

182 and fathers when youths go around trying to snare food from each
761 hut (the women ultimately letting them have it, often ostenta-
765 tiously). The opposition of adjacent age levels, and particularly the
561 hostility between sons and fathers, is plainly manifest in the morning
978 rampages of the *molimo* trumpet. The forest itself is symbolized by
[913] the leaves that conceal the trumpet (itself the symbol of the life-
giving organ), and *ekimi* is the avowed objective sought through song.
Akami, its antithesis, is symbolized again in the morning rampage,
frequently a physical battle between older and younger youths (di-
viding brothers) and between youths and hunters, and always a wordy
battle, with the hunters winning if for no other reason than that there
is a limit to the energy even of Mbuti youths.

182 Thus the *molimo* admirably reinforces social values and allows for
761 the harmless expression of hostility in areas of conflict. The only sym-
765 bolic representation of sexual conflict is *ekokomea*, and of course the
831 fire dance. But here the symbolism runs deeper, and concerns the
392 ultimate end, for just as *akami* is associated with death, so is *ekimi*
associated with life. The fire is not as realistically symbolic as the
trumpet, though it is undoubtedly as feminine as the trumpet is
masculine. But it is impossible not to be reminded of other instances
of the use of fire and sex symbolism.¹⁰

761 And perhaps we should see this concern with life not only in terms
181 of the threat of death from the village. Death is a threat to all soci-
eties, and for the Mbuti it is probably the one imperfection in an
otherwise perfect life; that is to say, it is the one thing for which they
have no certain answer, and to a practical people such as the Mbuti
uncertainty is imperfection.

+177 Ultimately the efforts of the Mbuti, if not of their system, are di-
rected to keeping the villagers physically out of the forest, an effort
that is successful largely because the villagers are only too thankful
+177 not to have to go into the forest. But just the fact that one villager
751 can set up a fishing camp in mid-forest and be visited by other villag-
ers, or that a chief can send his representative to a hunting camp to
demand (but not necessarily obtain) meat, means that even the forest

[17] ¹⁰ For instance, Audrey Richards (1956) writes of the Bemba that access to the an-
cestral spirits is to be had through the correct handling of fire and sex, and stresses (*ibid.*,
p. 30, seq.) the ritual association of sex, blood and fire as the *idde* *maitresse* behind most
of the ritual behavior of the Bemba. Hocart would certainly have seen the *molimo*, and
the "baptism of fire" (when Moké passes his hands through the flames and rubs them
over his face, then gently touches the hands of all those around), as a request "for the
gift of undying life" (Hocart, 1952, p. 47).

MOLIMO: THE DANCE OF DEATH

ground with their feet and dancing with their arms and bodies, but never moving from where they stood. The old woman grew taller and more upright. Her bent old frame straightened out and she stood proudly, arms at her side, bent at the elbows so that her hands were out in front. Those hands had a life of their own, pointing and gesticulating and dancing with infinite grace at the end of motionless arms. The old woman no longer looked from side to side. She knew she had nothing to fear now, that she was the victor. And when she stooped once more to approach the fire she did not stoop so low, and each step was a step forward. As the singing quickened so did her steps, until with a burst of frenzied shouting she was driven right into the flames. 765
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She seemed to hover there an instant, that skinny old crone who should have been burned to a cinder in a flash. Then she whirled around and kicked out with her feet, scattering the sacred molimo fire in all directions. Blazing logs and glowing embers alike she scattered, right among the circle of men surrounding her. And then she danced away, erect and proud. The men, without even faltering in their song, quickly gathered all the scattered embers and threw them back onto the remaining coals, and then for the first time they moved in a dance of their own. They danced in a wild circle, and as they danced their bodies swayed backward and forward, facing the fire, as though by imitation of the act of generation they were giving the fire new life. And as they danced the flames slowly began to rise, and as they rose the men danced all the more violently, until they had brought the fire of the molimo back to life.

Twice more this happened. Each time the old woman made a more determined effort to stamp the fire out of existence. And each time the strangely beautiful and exciting erotic dance of the men gave it new life. Finally the old woman conceded defeat and retreated among the others. Shortly afterward all the women disappeared, and 765
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[831] •